

Whatever floats your kayak

By Tom Dickson

Will kayaking someday overtake fishing as Montana's favorite water-based recreation? According to the Outdoor Foundation's 2021 Outdoor Participation Report, recreational kayaking—which is different from white-water kayaking, which requires a helmet and advanced skill—is the nation's fastest-growing water sport, with a 32 percent increase from 2015 to 2020. Fishing participation grew by roughly 15 percent during that time.

What's kayaking's appeal? Much the same as with fishing: enjoying nature, beautiful scenery, and time outdoors with friends and family. What's more, recreational kayaking is relatively inexpensive. It's also easy to learn, and the craft can be hauled without a trailer. No backing down a boat ramp lined with judgmental onlookers shouting steering advice.

I've watched the rise of recreational kayaking on the blue-ribbon stretch of the Missouri over the past 22 years, and my

observations square with the participation data. In the first several years I saw few casual floaters on the river, mostly sunburned partyers in innertubes. Then about 10 years ago, manufacturers found ways to make molded plastic kayaks affordable for an entire family. Today a person can buy one at Walmart for under \$250, while some inflatable kayaks sell online for less than \$150. You can even pick one up at some grocery stores when you go in to buy a gallon of milk.

As with so many outdoor activities, recreational kayaking took off during the COVID pandemic. People wanted to play outdoors, especially on Montana's scenic rivers. Grab-and-go kayak packages were tailor-made to fill the need.

As the boom in kayaking (and associated stand-up paddleboarding) made it easier for more Montanans and visitors to enjoy the outdoors, it also created problems. Fly anglers, especially, gripe about kayakers for:

- ▶ not caring where anglers are casting, and then floating too close to rising fish;
- ▶ being too loud, with their rowdy laughter and Bluetooth speakers blaring music, which doesn't sit well with those seeking a quiet time on the river; and
- ▶ not understanding longstanding boat ramp etiquette required so that lines of trailered boats can efficiently get on and off the ramp. (Tip to kayakers: Move your kayak and other gear off the ramp as quickly as possible so others can use it.)

Anglers' biggest complaint is that, unless kayakers buy a fishing license, they don't contribute a dime toward buying and maintaining FWP fishing access sites. No, state tax dollars don't fund the areas.

Last August I figured, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. I left my fly gear in the vehicle and launched a kayak onto the Missouri—just me and my dog. What a day! I didn't have to deal with my unruly mess of rod, reel, line, leader, tippet, flies, strike indicators, split shot, fly floatant, nippers, hemostat, net, and more. No need to search for rising fish or figure out at what depth trout were taking nymphs. Mesa and I just drifted with the current and enjoyed the surrounding scenery and occasional bald eagle or osprey flying overhead. So peaceful.

Sure, a few wade anglers glared at me, but I just waved and smiled. I wanted to tell them to ditch their gear and come join me. Who needs fishing? Kayaking's where it's at!

Then an angler's rod bent and he was fast to a big rainbow. I watched as he carefully waded downstream to keep up with the big trout, his reel screaming each time the fish made a deep run. Finally he worked the lunker to the shallows. I drifted past as he knelt down to release what looked like a 22-inch rainbow, a big grin on his face.

He looked up at me and waved. I waved back with a slightly forced smile, thinking of my fly gear sitting back in my vehicle.

Who needs fishing? Apparently I do. 🐾

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